DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 159 897 FL 009 727

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TITLE Familial Relationships, Topics, and Conversation Styles in Family Interaction on Television in the U.S.A.
PUB DATE Aug 78
NOTE 43p.; Paper presented at the World Congress of Sociology (9th, Uppsala, Sweden, August 14-19, 1978); For related documents, see FL 009 726 and 728 ; May be marginally legible due to print quality

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$2.06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Dialogue; *Discourse Analysis; Documentaries; Ethnography; *Family (Sociological Unit); Family Characteristics; *Family Relationship; Interpersonal Relationship; Language Patterns; *Language Research; Language Role; *Language Styles; Language Usage; Marriage; Programing (Broadcast); Scripts; Social Factors; Social Science Research; Sociolinguistics; Speech Communication; Speech Habits; Television; *Television Research
IDENTIFIERS Conversation; Prime Time Television; Soap Operas

ABSTRACT

The research presented here is a descriptive account, consonant with ethnographic methods, of interactions between and among family members in selected segments of documentary, prime time and soap opera television programming. The analysis of each program format was based on kinship relationships of participants, topics of conversation involving interpersonal or non-interpersonal relations, and styles of conversation (casual, personal, intimate, or ritual). The investigation concluded that: (1) kinship complexity of generational levels was greatest in documentary programming and least in prime time television, with a prime time concentration on immediate family interaction; soap operas portrayed extended in-law relationships more than the other formats; (2) marriage relations was the most frequent interpersonal topic in all formats; (3) interpersonal relationship topics and combinations of these topics were most prevalent in soap opera; (4) all formats had a similar distribution of non-interpersonal topics; (5) the intimate and personal styles were most frequent in the scripted dramas of soap opera and prime time, while documentaries primarily depicted a casual style; and (6) all formats primarily utilized dyadic interaction when the style was intimate. The research concludes that the images of the family emanating from language interaction differ considerably according to the nature of the television format which creates them. (Author/AMH)

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Familial Relationships, Topics, and Conversation Styles in Family Interaction on Television in the U.S.A.[1]

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Presented in the Sociolinguistics Division

Ninth World Congress of Sociology

Uppsala, Sweden, August, 1978

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ABSTRACT

The research is a descriptive analysis of Familial Relationships, Topics of Conversation, and Conversation Styles in interactions among family members in selected segments of documentary, prime time, and soap opera television programming. For each program format, a videotape sample was analyzed by delineating kinship relationships of participants, noting topics of conversation within an interpersonal or non-interpersonal division and subdivided into a thirteen category topic system, and by designating styles of conversation (casual, personal, intimate, or ritual). The investigation concluded that: (1) kinship complexity of generational leveles was greatest in documentary programming and least in prime time television, with a prime time concentration on immediate family interaction, while soap operas portrayed extended in-law relationships more than the other formats; (2) marriage relations was the most frequent interpersonal topic in all formats; (3) interpersonal relationship topics and combinations of these topics were more prevalent in soap opera than documentary or prime time conversations; (4) all formats had a similar distribution of non-interpersonal topics; (5) the intimate and personal styles were most frequent in the scripted dramas of soap opera and prime time, while documentaries primarily depicted a casual style; and (6) all formats primarily utilized dyadic interaction when the style was intimate; but soap operas had dyadic-intimate speech the most, and marriage partner-intimate conversations were more frequent in prime time and soap opera, while documentaries had a greater incidence of parent-child intimate speech. As an ethnographic approach to the study of language and the family on television, the research concludes that the images of the family emanating from language interaction differ considerably according to the nature of the television format which creates them.

Familial Relationships, Topics, and Conversation Styles in

Family Interaction on Television in the U.S.A.

Introduction

In the last four decades, the world community has rapidly witnessed a media explosion. The introduction of television and its broad-scale development has provided a monumental challenge to academicians and intellectual concerned with cultural transmission, public policy, and the general environment in which people are continuously socialized. The specific concerns most frequently addressed regarding this important medium tend to apply to policy and regulation, general aspects of program content, and assessment of the impact of television. The historians have been hard at work trying to understand the precise nature of television's development; the critics, both academic and popular, have tried to function as aesthetic watchdogs; those with a bent toward more social scientific inquiry have developed experimental methodologies in an attempt to ascertain the effects of the medium on its viewers; content analysts have surveyed topic and visual aspects; and media theorists have been writing books and articles which aim at developing some useful notions regarding what we should pay attention to and how we should attend to the television medium in order to become more critically responsible.

In the urgency of trying to comprehend this new and pervasive visual world, the dimensions of language and conversation that are a part of that world have gone unexplored and, at most, have served as only a backdrop of evidence from which other aspects of the medium can be investigated. The investigations undertaken by the present authors bring issues of language and conversation in television to the foreground and,

thus, comprise a new research strategy addressed to aspects of the medium heretofore unexplored in any sophisticated manner.

The frame of reference for the present study and others that are a part of the larger research program is one derived from an ethnographic approach to sociolinguistics. The ethnography of communication, and more specifically, the ethnography of speech, championed by Hymes for some time now, takes as its focus the "analysis of the communicative conduct of a community" (Hymes, 1974, p. 9). The ethnography is necessarily of communication since language in use, i.e., speech, bears essentially a communicative burden. Speech must be understood in context, and ethnographers are well directed by Hymes to attend to matters of who the participants are, what channel is used, what codes are operative, what the setting is, what the message forms and their genres are, what attitudes and contents may be conveyed, and what type of events are actually occurring (Hymes, 1974, p. 10). Whether most or any ethnographic analyses adequately meet the ideals suggested by Hymes is probably not the important point. What is important to ethnography is recognizing that "speech acts are normally parts of somewhat larger speech events"(Fishman, 1970, p. 41); whether the speech acts are one or many, there is context, and it is that context that provides the frame for describing norms for speaking.

Ethnographies of communication as sociolinguistic documents deal with speaking that occurs in naturalistic settings; the concern is with the ways in which people actually pattern their speech communication. The present investigation is based on the same assumptions about how speech should be studied but the focus is on the ethnography of television communication. Our interest is not simply to provide a description of selected aspects of language use in television programming, but rather is founded in the general assumption that television programs provide a broad scope of behaviors that can function as models for its consumers. This general assumption is in accord with the sociocultural model of mass communication presented by DeFleur and

Ball-Rokeach (1975). This model is essentially a model of persuasion processes based on the notion "that mass-communicated messages can be used to provide individuals with new and seemingly group-supported interpretations -- social constructions of reality -- regarding some phenomenon toward which they are acting" (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1975, p. 248). The interpretations inferred from mass media content can potentially range from those regarding concrete content aspects to those regarding appropriate forms of interaction. This concept has been addressed in a more encompassing fashion by Gerbner (1967), who further delineates the need for research into the broad acculturation process of which the media are so much a part. The homogenization of culture becomes the ultimate concern, regardless of whether the media are acting as reinforcement agents or change agents.

The present investigation was designed to provide a descriptive account, consonant with ethnographic methods, of interactions between and among family members in three modes of television programming in the United States. The study is focused on three characteristics of these interactions: the precise familial relationships of the characters presented in the interactions, the topics discussed by characters, and the styles of conversation that are evident within the interactions. The results of the study yield normative pictures of the situational appropriateness of certain kinds of talk conducted in certain styles by characters who bear certain familial relationships to one another.

The family was selected as the relational focus of the investigation for two reasons, one pragmatic and the other sociological. Pragmatically, we were interested in comparing interactions conducted within the same role constellation (Bernstein, 1970) taken from media content representative of three different programming formats. The family constellation was readily available for comparative analysis.

From a sociological perspective, the American family is of considerable interest at this point in time. There are few traces left in America of the extended family,

and nuclear family units composed of parents and children experience considerable stress in their adjustment to changing values and life styles. It is not uncommon to hear laments such as "the family unit is in crisis" and "the importance of the American family has eroded." Even the Vice President of the United States chose to write an article titled, "The Family in Trouble" (Mondale, 1977), but he, like many others, expresses the belief that "families are enduring institutions" (p. 39).

Changes in the American family and challenges to its integrity as a basic role constellation have prompted extensive intellectual and theraputic analyses of communication processes within that constellation.

The traditionally theraputic approaches tend to be psychoanalytic in nature, but new types of therapy have emerged which are based on research generated from a systems orientation. Collins (1978) characterizes these latter efforts as concerned with determining "the behavioral effects of communication, the flow of interaction in the family, or the impact of multiple member interactions on communication" (p. 2). There also exists a more positive approach to family communication that emphasizes defining, analyzing, and establishing the nature of family strengths (Miller, 1975; Otto, 1975).

It is fair to say that there are few sectors of American society in which discussion and concern about the family is not evident, and that concern is as much a popular phenomenon as an academic one. Recently, one of the major news magazines in the United States provided a special report titled, "Saving the Family" (Newsweek, May 15, 1978). As part of that report, a major section was devoted to the video family. Walters (1978) offers the not-too-far-fetched observation that television representations of the family have "altered our assumptions about how parents and siblings should behave" (p. 87). Commenting on one particular program series (included in the sample for this study), he sees its family characters coming "remarkably close to suggesting how we actually carry our lives" (p. 87). For instance, as part of the concern for the effects of

television on children in relation to the socialization process, considerable research has investigated the nature of family interaction patterns and the influence or control this exerts on a child's desire to select television programming which reinforces and reflects these patterns (Nwanko, 1970).

Former Federal Communications Commissioner and media consumer spokesperson Nicholas Johnson proposes that improvement of the media system in the United States, in order to contribute more beneficially to the society, can only occur through a better understanding of the relationship between the institutionalized message systems of the mass media and the social institutions, such as the family, that are depicted in and affected by these message systems.[2]

We can make no claims about the impact of television programs which are centered on families, but their popularity and the diversity of their audiences is evidence of their appeal.

Television Formats

Three diverse television program formats, each having specific programs which centralize the family unit as the primary human focus, were selected as content samples suitable for investigation and comparative analysis. One format is documentary in nature and utilizes the award winning television series, "Six American Families," that was produced for both public and commercial television dissemination in the United States. The series offers a unique look at different family situations in America by recording the actual activities and conversations of six real families. Some of the content in these programs involved narration, and some consisted of documentarist-family member interviews, but the substantial emphasis was on a verite-style capturing of family member interaction.[3] It was this latter manner of content that was highly appropriate for the purposes of this research. While it must be noted that even verite filming of subjects ultimately results in an abstraction of reality due to the

documentarist's editing decisions, the entire series nonetheless was widely publicized to the American audience as "a look at yourself and those around you." In any case, "Six American Families" is undoubtedly the most ambitious televised record of a variety of actual American familes produced to date. It certainly is the most comprehensive cross-sectioning of non-fictional family conversation ever to be broadcast to the American public within a single program context, and thus its significance here.

Research on the content of television documentaries in the United States is limited with respect to language and the family simply because there has existed no well developed tradition of documentaries on the family. The only other major documentary effort to deal with cinema verite recording of an actual family, and to have gained national notoriety, was the public television series, "An American Family," first broadcast in the early seventies. Beyond intuitive critical observation, research studies of this series primarily dealt not with language characteristics, but rather with the latent effects resulting from status conferral, or instant stardom syndrome, that the televised family experienced after the series was broadcast. Most content research of television documentaries has focused on the network television news documentary. In terms of verbal language, the range of these studies has naturally tended toward journalistic objectivity-bias constructs and topic analyses (McNulty, 1974; Smith, 1972), but not with the nature or structure of language characteristics. Much research has also dealt with the visual structure of documentaries and some has attempted to create structural pictures of visual-verbal content characteristics in interaction (Davis, 1975, 1978).

A second television program format utilized in these studies represents the most vital segment of American commercial television -- prime time network entertainment drama. Prime time relates to the evening hours when the largest number of American viewers watch television. From the ABC television network, currently the network that commands the greatest audience ratings in the United States, two program series were

picked for the prime time sample. "Eight is Enough" is a weekly one-hour production centered around a contemporary family with eight children. It can be termed a mixture between situation comedy and more seriously oriented plots attempting to capture in an entertaining fashion the interesting aspects of everyday life. Also set in contemporary America is "Family," a one-hour long, weekly series following the happenings of a five-member family through the maze of life's activities. This program deals with a more crises-oriented approach to plot, but both "Family" and "Eight is Enough" are tailored to mass appeal through tightly scripted packaging. Both confront the possible social exigencies of any family in the United States. A substantial portion of most episodes depicts family members in interaction with one another and it is this content that becomes an appropriate target for conversational analysis.

Prime time network television programming has been content analyzed extensively over the years. The vast thrust of this research has normally been a reaction to social issues prevailing in the United States for which television has been deemed negatively responsible. The effects of violence on television, and correspondingly the amount and nature of violence on television, remains the most notable example of content research (Gerbner, 1977), followed by various other viens of study seeking to document the existence of social ills such as racial and sexual discrimination, and all manner of role stereotyping on television (Lemon, 1977; Miller and Reeves, 1976; Roberts, 1971; and Seggar, 1977). This research, however, is essentially interested in the visual content of prime time television and uses the incidence of visual occurrence as the basic unit of analysis. Quite often research on the language of television would be interpreted by the media researcher as a semiotic or visual literacy investigation as opposed to an analysis of aural-verbal language (Metz, 1974; Whitaker, 1970). The fact is that a tremendous void exists with respect to natural language analysis and television content.

The third television program format considered in these studies is the afternoon

serialized soap opera. All commercial television networks in the United States air a number of different soap operas each afternoon, and an estimated number of 20 to 30 million viewers (Astrachan, 1975) tune in regularily to follow the lives of the characters portrayed. Traditionally, the audience has been composed of housewives, but in recent years that audience has diversified considerably. All soap operas presently on the air were reviewed for the degree to which the family is centralized. Two programs were selected because of all available, they seemed to center almost exclusively on family units. "As The World Turns," one of the oldest televised soap operas, was selected from the CBS television network, and "Ryan's Hope" was selected from the ABC television network. Both programs, like all soap operas, are essentially dramatic in nature. "As The World Turns" features several family groupings from the middle to upper middle economic classes. "Ryan's Hope," more diversified in its representation of socio-economic groups, centers on an Irish-American family.

Unlike many television programs which rely on action, the modality of the soap opera is verbal. Characters primarily engage in conversation, and almost all filming is done in the television studio. Each program contains a broad range of plots and sub-plots which are developed over an extended period of time. Scripts are written for each program airing, and production is quite unlike that for the prime time format. Actors receive their scripts a day in advance, and film each day in order to produce a new episode for each day of the week (excluding weekends).

Despite the fact that soap operas have been aired since the advent of television, there is not an extensive body of research focusing on them. The research that has been done is mostly of a content analytic nature or aimed at assessing the uses and gratifications derived by the viewer. The content analytic studies have considered the role models portrayed in the soap operas (Ramsdell, 1973), the image they create of women (Downing, 1974), and the general nature of the content of conversations conducted (Katzman, 1972). Studies of the ways in which television viewers use soap

operas and the gratifications they derive from them are really an extension and development of earlier research done on radio soap operas (Herzog, 1941). Compesi (1976) established that for one very popular soap opera, viewers attributed their devotion to one of seven reasons: entertainment, habit, convenience, social utility, relaxation, escape from boredom, and reality exploration or advice. Barton (1977) concluded that for the elderly, soap operas provide a basis for their interactions with people in the real world; it gives them an on-going topic of conversation.

The dramatic nature of the soap opera, the faithfulness of its viewers, its verbal nature, and at least some evidence that people do relate what they see to their own lives, provide a sound justification for investigating the models of speech communication contained within this most unique format.

Research Variables

The precise nature of the study reported herein is an investigation of the interrelationships betwen kinship relationships, topic of conversation, and style of conversation as these are depicted in family interactions in three different formats of television programming: documentary, prime time, and soap opera.

Interest in the nature and diversity of kinship relationships as one component of the analysis stems from the importance of role relationships to ethnographic descriptions of communication. Fishman (1972) states that recognition of role relationships by participants "is part of the communality of norms and behaviors upon which the existence of speech communities exist" (p. 37). He attributes frequent use of the role relationship concept by researchers interested in language and society to the fact that "role-relationships may be used as data-organizing units both with respect to variation in talk as well as with respect to other variations in interpersonal behavior" (pp. 38-39). The procedures for coding kinship relationships in the present study entail specifying the precise nature and range of the familial bonds presented.

Additionally, every conversational segment has been codified according to the exact number of participants included.

The second variable in question is topic of conversation. Interest here is in the use of a specified schema that is economical, yet adequately represents topicality in a manner that allows comparisons both within and between formats. We are concerned with the nature of contents conveyed in the interactions. The procedures for content analyzing topics developed by Katzman (1972) were used as a basis for construing topicality. Katzman, in his study of soap operas on television, developed a system which delineates topics that involve interpersonal relationships and those that deal with explicit matters other than interpersonal relationships. Each of these broad categories was further divided to create subcategories. Topics of interpersonal relationships were broken down into: (1) marriage, (2) family, (3) romantic, (4) professional/business, and (5) other interpersonal. Explicit topics were more specifically described as talk about: (1) personality, (2) health, (3) deviant behavior, (4) domestic matters, (5) vocational/business matters, (6) small talk, and (7) other explicit topics. The system was generally satisfactory for characterizing topics, but two modifications were made. First, an additional category was added to the explicit topics grouping to account for a similar set of topics that were frequent enough to warrant extracting them from the "other" category. Thus, an additional category of explicit topics was labeled: (8) reports on the activities of others. The second modification is more a clarification. Content was construed as belonging to a particular topic category when it was either explicitly the topic or when the conversation clearly revolved around the topic. This clarification is especially necessary when dealing with interpersonal topics.

Finally, all segments of conversation were characterized as to their style. The most important work originating the idea that style is a useful concept for describing interaction as well as describing language characteristics is Joos's, The Five Clocks

(1961). Therein Joos proposed that context is a key to the way in which interactions will flow and the type of verbal features that will be used. Hymes (1974) also deals with the concept of style by recognizing it as a value because "it does insist that modes or organization of linguistic features, including the level of a 'language,' are not simply given, but are to be determined in relation to a community or other social context" (p. 59). Hymes (1974) treatment of genres also lends to an interpretation of what is meant here by conversational style; "the motion of genre implies the possibility of identifying formal characteristics traditionally recognized" (p. 61). Essentially, styles define types of speech, and those types are most readily defined according to some underlying and global purpose that contextualizes interaction and accounts for the formal characteristics defining it.

The conception of style used in the present investigation is most closely related to the work of Tallman (1975). She suggests, based on a number of conversation analyses conducted by herself and her students, that there are four styles of conversation. Public style occurs when strangers meet and must exchange conversation. It does not last long; it is formalistic in a variety of ways. Social style occurs when the primary task is to keep the conversation going. Silence is taboo, turn overlaps and interruptions are frequent, and each speaker seems to focus more on her/his contributions than on the other participants' speaking. At its best, it entertains. In social style, utterances tend to be short, and topics come and go rather quickly. Personal style functions to bring participants closer together in a focused interaction. Personal opinions and feelings are shared, and the comments of others are more carefully attended to in the interest of developing a topic of some consequence. Utterances are longer than in social style. Hesitations and silences are tolerated. Intimate style exists when participants speak their minds, even at the risk of the relationship. Topics are sensitive and important. Precise formal features of this style are not greatly elaborated on by Tallman as she had few actual examples to work with.

With the cited works on style functioning as a heuristic, four styles are distinguished for the present investigation. Assuming that style has something to do with global purpose, four different global purposes give shape to the enumeration. The style delineations are as much hypothesis as fact, and research described in other papers serves to define some of the formal properties of the various styles of conversation (Davis and Johnson, 1978; Johnson and Davis, 1978).

Casual style occurs when the purpose of the interaction is routine and matter-of-fact. Casual style operates in cases such as the exchange of greetings, routine description of activities, making social plans, coordinating domestic responsibilities, and handling usual day-to-day problems. Personal style is operative in conversations where the purpose is to discuss people and their relationships with one another in such a way that the discussion extends knowledge regarding the persons and offers the opportunity for the expression of opinions regarding others. Conversational elements might focus on discussion of family members, friends, or parties known in some way to the participants. Intimate style is found when participants focus to some extent on either themselves and their personal and private identities, or on themselves as members of relationships that have personal, private, and intimate elements. The intimate style covers affectionate interchanges, self-disclosure, crises, and interpersonal conflict. Ritualistic style occurs when participants co-engage in a routine that is literally scripted and rigidly formal, i.e., when the purpose is to share in a predetermined set of utterances as a gesture of commonality. Chanting, meal ceremonies, and singing are all examples of ritualistic style.

While there is little on which to base hypothesis development in the investigation of the variables of this study as they exist in television content dealing with family interaction, guidelines were developed for the creation of a descriptive normative picture. These guidelines were based both on what the investigators felt was significant to look at and also on what was initially believed to be present in the

television programs. The guidelines are articulated in the following statements:

1. Kinship relations depicted are most complex for documentary and soap opera programming and least complex for prime time programming.
2. Topics of conversation are both more diverse and more heavily weighted toward interpersonal relationships and personal problems in the soap opera format.
3. Conversations of intimate style occur most frequently in the soap opera format and least frequently in the documentary format.
4. Ritualistic interactions occur most frequently in the documentary format.
5. Across all program formats, conversations of intimate style are most likely to occur in dyads, and are most likely to consist of marriage partners or parent-child relationships.

Methods

Sample

The television content samples for this research were broadcast during April, May, and June of 1977. The entire documentary series entitled "Six American Families," consisting of six programs (approximately 340 minutes of content) was utilized as the base of the sample and comprised one format type. This series was telecast over the public television network and by the commercial Group W Network. The second format analyzed was prime time (evening) fictional entertainment drama from the commercial television network ABC (American Broadcasting Company). Four episodes of the series entitled "Eight is Enough" and four episodes of "Family," all broadcast during the same period of time as the documentary series and consisting of approximately the same total amount of content, were used as the prime time sample. Likewise, a sample from a third format type traditionally referred to as soap opera drama, was drawn from "Ryan's Hope," an ABC afternoon program, and from "AS the World Turns," a CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) program.

From the sample of each format, all conversations that were exclusively family interactions were isolated. A family relationship for the purposes of this study was defined as one that exists by birth or through marriage. All participants in the conversational interaction must be of formal familial status. A conversational unit, or segment, was delimited as all discourse existing from the first verbal or phonetically transceibable element to the last element in a situation where a set number of family members were speaking to one another. If a member left a conversation, a new segment would begin. If another family member enters an existing interaction, a new segment would also begin, or, if a non-family member interrupts or becomes a part of a conversation, the preceeding segment ends. The conversational segment then, becomes the basic unit of analysis for the present research. The total number of segments identified for each program format was as follows: Documentary, n=139, Prime Time, n=244, and Soap Opera, n=109. Familial relationships of characters, topics of conversation, and styles of conversation were coded for each segment within the three television format types.

Procedure

In addition to the videotape records of the program content in the context of the whole episode and as extracted in family conversational segments, verbatim transcriptions of all conversations were compiled by a trained group of researchers. The family relationship and style variables were coded from the original videotape record of the conversation in the program context. This was achieved by first having research assistants code each segment, followed by a second coding pass conducted by the principal investigators. The topics variable was coded by the investigators from the transcriptions of each segment. The coding procedure was based on methods tested by Davis and Smith (1978) and resulting in 99% intercoder reliability for the familial relationship variable, and 94% reliability for the judgmentally complex topic and style variables.

Familial Relationship. This variable involved a precise categorization of the kinship relations in each conversational segment. Eight major relational categories are used as broad parameters to structure different kinship combinations the researchers found in the total sample of television content. The eight parameter categories are: husband-wife, father-children, mother-children, parents-children, siblings, non-immediate family, clan, and gradparent(s)-grandchild(ren). Within each parameter relationship, subcategories (49 total) were identified. For example, under mother-children, a mother-son-daughter-in-law relationship would be one subcategory. Along with the exclusive and exhaustive sub-categories, numeric representation of the total number of participants and other relationship characteristics were coded for each segment.

Topics. As discussed previously, thirteen topic variables were used to define what was talked about in family conversations across the three program formats. Five variables typify the existence of conversations dealing with interpersonal relationships and eight variables were operationally defined to account for all other topics. A condensed form of the operational definitions follows:

1. Marriage--discussion about the relationship of married people by themselves or others.
2. Family--discussion about familial relationships and family activities such as childhood family experiences, family traditions, and current relations.
3. Romantic--conversation about any couple which are not married, and including talk of their relationship, dates, proposals, or problems.
4. Professional/Business--topics referring to work or careers involving an interpersonal aspect, for example, problems at work because of interpersonal conflicts with a superior.
5. Other Interpersonal--discussion of any interpersonal relation outside of the above categories, such as friendship.
6. Personality--discussion of someone's character, mood, idiosyncracies and the like.

7. Health--talk of physical or mental condition, diseases, fatigue, insomnia, or illness.
8. Deviant Behavior--socially defined illegitimate behavior such as crime, careless actions, or illicit affairs.
9. Domestic Matters--discussion of daily plans/routines, preparation of meals, chores, care of children, or financial aspects of the domestic environment.
10. Vocational/Business--standard of an individual's work, pragmatic aspects of employment situation, or career goals and progress.
11. Small Talk--greeting and leave talking conversation, incidental discussion of weather or time, or things like good nights and good morning cordials.
12. Other Explicit Topics--wedding plans, vacation plans, sports, the news, or instruction on how to do something.
13. Reports of Another's Activities--discussion which is really a description in detail of what someone is doing, such as, "John is on a vacation and has visited . . . ."

The first five topics identify interpersonal relations in conversations and the remaining eight account for non-interpersonal topics in family conversations. It is important to note that this research investigates the existence, or presence-absence of any topic within a conversational segment but does not quantify the frequency of occurrence of a given topic in a single segment. Therefore, the methodology results in data that indicate the number of conversations that deal with each topic, or topics, rather than a gross frequency count of how many times topics are spoken about in every conversation.

Style. Four characteristics of style, labelled casual, personal, intimate, and ritual, comprised the third broad variable set. These four categories were coded by segment for each format. As in the topic variable, coding documents the presence or absence of each style in a conversation and did not count the frequency of each stylistic category's occurrence within a conversation. Again, the data reports the number of

segments that have one or any combination of styles.

Data Analysis

The coded information for all variables as they existed in each segment and for each television format, was transferred to numerical computer readable form. The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, 2nd ed., and the computer facilities of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Results

Kinship Relationships

There are several ways to view the complexity of familial relationships in order to consider how they differ across television formats. One would be to quantify the number of conversations in which at least three generations are represented. While the total for all formats was not large, the documentary (11.5%) and the soap opera (8.2%) format showed a greater percentage of segments with three generation levels than did the prime time programming (2.1%).

The degree to which two generation levels are depicted in conversations can be interpreted from Table 1. A combination of categories, 2, 3, 4, 7, and 8 shows that 81% of all documentary segments had at least two generations, while 58% of the soap opera and 55% of the prime time segments had two or more. With this measure, the assumption of the first research question holds, but the scripted dramatic programs appear very similar.

Within the relationship subcategories, 14.6% of all conversations in the soap opera sample and 4.3% of the documentary sample had in-law relationships, compared to 3.3% of the prime time segments, providing evidence from another view that familial relationships are more diverse in the soap opera content.

Although the total number of participants in a segment would not necessarily

reveal kinship complexity, a quantifying of the subcategory relationship participants does suggest complexity from a different perspective. Of the 49 subcategory possibilities, all three formats have a substantial number of segments with just one or two participants in the sub-relationship, but soap opera conversations were almost exclusively one or two person counts (see Table 2). The documentary and prime time formats on the other hand had 9.3% and 19.5%, respectively, of their segments with three or more participants in the subcategory field compared to the 1.8% for soap opera. Likewise, in terms of the total number of participants in segments, prime time content used an average of 3.9 people per segment, documentaries 3.1, and soap operas 2.4.

Summary. Particularly in a comparison of soap opera and prime time, it appears that a greater number of people with blood ties exist in prime time conversations, as opposed to a fewer number of people with slightly more diverse relationships in soap opera family interactions. Generationally, the largest difference exists between documentaries and prime time. Documentaries had fewere people per segment, but with wider generation levels. Prime time had more people per segment and those people were more generationally similar.

Topics of Conversation

Evidence that the soap opera format concentrates more on interpersonal relationships, and does so more diversely than the other formats can be characterized in several ways. Table 3 shows that 58.7% of all conversations in soap opera segments utilized at least one interpersonal topic, with only 43.5% of prime time segments and 31% of the documentary segments indicating the presence of interpersonal topics. In addition, 25.7% of the time, soap opera family interactions consisted of two or more interpersonal topics, while only 6.5% of documentary and 7% of prime time segments had combinations of interpersonal topics.

A graphic representation (Chart 1) of the number of segments which have interper-

sonal topics and how they are spread, illustrates that the soap opera has a greater incidence over the range of interpersonal topics than the other formats. While not specifically addressed in the second research question, this was also found to be true of non-interpersonal topics. Table 4 demonstrates that in a conversation, the interpersonal relationships dealing with the family as a unit were more likely to be present than any other interpersonal topic for all three types of television content (33% of the conversations in soap opera, 25.2% in documentary, and 26.6% in prime time). However, the soap opera content had substantially larger quantities of conversations with "Marriage" relations (26.6%) or "Other Interpersonal" relations (23.9%) than documentary (5.8% and 1.4%) or prime time (5% and 5.8%).

With respect to the presence of non-interpersonal topics (Table 5), 95% of the documentary, 91.7% of the prime time, and 92.7% of the soap opera segments dealt with at least one non-interpersonal topic. As was the case, however, with interpersonal, the soap opera had more segments with two or more interpersonal topics (62.4%) than prime time (43.6%) or documentary (35.3%).

Intimate Style

A cross tabulation of the style or combinations of style existing in segments of conversation, by television format, was used to determine if conversations of intimate style occur most frequently in the soap opera format and least often in the documentary when only family members are interacting. Table 6 represents the total number of segments that contained each of the four style categories. This includes segments that contained combinations of style. 49% of the soap opera segments were at least partially intimate, compared to 35% for prime time and only 22% for the documentary.

In addition, all conversations that were exclusively of the intimate style resulted in a similar trend. In soap opera segments, 26.6% (n=29) were totally intimate, in prime time 14.5% (n=35) were totally intimate, and in documentary only 9.4% (n=13) were

totally intimate. Table 7 further indicates that documentary segments were more heavily weighted or oriented to casual conversational style than the other two formats, and that prime time and soap opera segments had substantially greater use of the personal style as well as the intimate style than did the documentary. Another interesting result of the style analysis was that the scripted soap opera and prime time conversations used combinations of style more often than documentary segments. The soap opera and the prime time formats had 35.8% and 41.8%, respectively, multi-stylistic segments, compared to the documentary which had 17.9% of the segments coded as multi-stylistic.

Ritualistic Style

Use of the ritual style, although consistent with the original projection of being more frequent in the documentary programming, was very sparse in all three formats. With a very low n in each type of format, (see Table 6) the comparison of results across formats had lessoned significance.

Participants, Relationships, and Styles

An analysis of the number of participants in each segment that indicated the presence of the intimate style, whether exclusively or in combination with other styles, provided data for the notion that across program formats, conversations with intimate style would most likely occur in dyadic interactions. In the soap opera sample, this was particularly true with 83% of the intimate segments being dyadic (see Table 7). In prime time, intimate segments were dyads 69% of the time, and in documentary they were dyads 42% of the time, but this was still by far the single most frequently occurring participant constellation in intimate documentary segments.

Segments that consisted purely (only) of the intimate style were then isolated for each format, and the participant groupings were again tabulated. Of the conversations that were exclusively intimate, 82% were dyadic in soap opera, 74.3% were dyadic in prime time, and 38.5% were dyadic in the documentary sample (see Table 7). Again, in

the case of documentary segments, the 38.5% was the largest single percentage. It is interesting to note that for both the pure intimate segments, and for the total segments with intimate style, the documentary format displays a more balanced distribution of participant groupings than the other formats.

The second assumption being investigated in this area stated that intimate conversations would most likely consist of marriage partners or parent(s) and child(ren). For each format, Table 8 presents first the frequency of segments according to relationship that occur for conversations that are exclusively intimate, and then, the relationship frequency for all conversations that have intimate style usage. 84.6% of the documentary segments that are purely intimate consist of parent-child relationships, with no marriage partner occurrences. 87% of all segments that show at least some intimate style consisted of these relationships. For soap operas, 65.5% of the pure, and 74% of the total intimate segments were marriage partner or parent-child, and prime time was 51.9% pure, and 60% of total intimate as marriage partner or parent-child relationship.

Sibling interaction accounted for a greater precentage of the intimate conversations in prime time programming (32%), to only 10% and 13% respectively in intimate documentary and soap opera segments.

Discussion

The creation of descriptive structures relating to the contextual environment of language as it exists in family interaction on television in the United States was the primary goal of this study. Familial Relationships, Topics of Conversation, and Stylistic Characteristics of family speech were analyzed over three different formats of television programming that centered on the family unit.

Familial Relationships

Prime time television programming depicted interactions of only immediate family

members more often than the soap opera or documentary television. This may have some significance in that prime time programs have a much greater penetration into the society at a time when concern over vanishing extended family relationships is growing. Prime time television obviously reflects the state of the family in society to some degree, but does its representation also perpetuate the eroding image of the extended family?

Documentary content, on the other hand, seemed to strive to include interaction of two and three generation levels much more so than commercial television. Perhaps the documentarist's role, which was to present an encompassing view of a variety of families, helped to shape a sensitivity to the importance of extended relationships. Without the pressures of commercial television, it is perhaps also easier for the documentary to make this commitment. The soap opera falls between the other two formats with respect to generation levels, but differs greatly from both in that it presents in-law relationships more often. For different reasons then, it is clear that the documentary and the soap opera are unlike network prime time programming with regard to kinship complexity. Family conversations on network television have greater numbers of people in non-multiple generations, and with an exclusion of in-law relations, than other forms of television content, constructing a unique image of the family for its audience.

Topics of Conversation

For all three types of television, over 90% of the family conversations dealt at least in part with non-interpersonal topics. This does not seem surprising and probably reflects the nature of family speech outside of television. Over the range of interpersonal topics, however, the fact that the soap opera has more conversations with at least one interpersonal topic, and a much greater incidence of two or more of these topics, indicates that the focus of soap opera interaction depends on interpersonal relationships. Soap operas utilize a small number of actors in closed studio environ-

ments and episodes for daily broadcast must be constructed. This demands an economically efficient packaging of content which does not allow for much physical action or location visuals. The significance of language becomes paramount here, because plots and program depend more on verbalization. It is not illogical that in order to make language a captivating central focus of television, one must concentrate on the interpersonal relations and problems of people, thus the use of such topics to a greater degree in soap operas. Further, it can be speculated that the concentration may be an abstracting of the way family members actually interact in society. If the families of the documentary series are a credible measure, this is true.

It is interesting to note that of all the interpersonal topics, family relationships are more likely to be a part of a family discussion than other topics, regardless of television format. The real difference is that the soap opera conversation will deal with marriage relations or other people's interpersonal problems more often.

Style

The analysis of style may have afforded a look at a primary difference between the language of scripted, story-line entertainment television, and the way in which discussion is focused in actual family conversation, even when those families are speaking for television. In prime time programming, and especially in the soap opera programming, the need to move quickly through plot development and dramatic intensity, combined with the fact that the plots themselves are condensed abstractions of life's situations in story form, creates a demand for language usage far removed from the humdrum banalities of normal conversation. The intimate style and personal style of conversation were used much more in the soap opera and prime time programs which naturally must depend on these qualities to depict a story which will attract and 'entertain' an audience. They also demonstrated the intimate and personal styles together more often than the documentary conversations.

On the other hand, the family discussions of actual families as they were presented in the documentary programs, tended to use a casual style predominately. This would seem to more closely approximate what family conversation is really like, although one never knows what inhibiting effect the documentarist's camera had on what was said, nor what was edited out of these programs.

As part of the concern for investigating family language interaction, a unique interest exists regarding the ritual style, defined as group prayers, songs, chants, cheers and the like. In one respect, our television samples did not show a large incidence of the ritual style, but then it may not be used very often by families in comparison to the other styles. What is of greater importance is the fact that the ritual style did exist in each television format and seems to have a place in family interaction regardless of who is creating the television program, or for what purpose.

Participants, Relationships, and Style

Of the many possibilities of variable interaction that might be analyzed from this study's data, the relationships between intimate style and (1) participant constellation, and (2) familial relationship were chosen as viable examples to illustrate the unique manner of results in this type of study. In the three television formats, the intimate style was used mainly in two-person interactions, but there was a large difference between the soap opera and documentary, with prime time in the middle. The documentary had a more even distribution of intimate conversations with larger family groups. This may be a function of the documentarist's obligation to present more of the family in such situations. In the case of the soap opera, and also in prime time, productional exigencies may again be a factor as it is easier and less expensive to use smaller numbers of actors wherever possible. In any case, the model of intimate discussion by family members must vary considerably in the viewers' minds when watching these three types of programming.

Most intimate conversations consist of parent-child or marriage partner relation-

ships in each format. The documentary was very oriented to parent-child intimate discussion. Perhaps a real deficiency in the documentary series is the realization that there were no marriage-partner-only purely intimate conversations. This might reveal what a married couple is willing to talk about in front of a camera, or it may have been the documentarist's intention to include intimate discussion only if a larger family unit was present. Another possibility is that the creator of these documentaries was primarily committed to intense family portrayals since the family unit and not the marriage unit was the focus. Prime time and soap opera did not have as great a frequency of parent-child intimacy, but did have considerable marriage partner intimate segments, while at the same time distributing intimate conversations to other types of relationships more often than the documentary. Prime time had a large sibling-intimate discussion incidence, which is due to one program series with eight children, commonly at the center of the plot.

Implications

The discriptive pictures resulting from this research would seem to have relevance for the study of the family, and television's role in the presentation of the family to the American society. The similarity of certain aspects of family language across differing formats, and the differences which exist between fictional television and actual family interaction, contributes to the growing concerns of family and television in the United States.

As an ethnographic approach to the study of language in television, the kinship relations-topics-style analyses in relation to the content and nature of family interaction, are seen as a positive approach to the development of encyclopedic (Hays, 1969), environmental, and contextual knowledge of the communicative experience in which language functions.

The greatest utility of the information resulting from this type of research,

however, is realized when it is integrated with other forms of linguistic research investigating the same body of conversational language (see Davis and Johnson, 1978, and Johnson and Davis, 1978). In the spirit of macro-systemic analysis, which produces multi-variable investigation of large bodies of phenomena, and which seeks to discover the interrelationships of those variables (Rapoport, 1969), the essence of the current study in concert with others, provides a greater potential for understanding the comprehensive nature of language in use.

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Footnotes

[1] The authors wish to thank Thomas Wiley and Robert Baukus, both graduate students in Communication Studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, for their valuable assistance on this project.

[2] Johnson, Nicholas. From comments made during a speech entitled, "The Future of Communication," delivered at the Toward Tomorrow Fair, 1978, University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

[3] Vérité refers to the film and video style developed in the last twenty years which subscribes to the notion of letting the camera merely record life's activities as they occur, without prejudice to the medium.

Table 1

Number of Segments and Percentages

Utilizing Relationship Categories

Relationship	Documentary (n=139)		Soap Opera (n=109)		Prime Time (n=244)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
1. Husband-Wife	12	8.6%	29	26.5%	21	8.7%
2. Father-Child	21	15.1%	19	17.4%	87	36.1%
3. Mother-Child	41	29.5%	24	22.0%	30	12.4%
4. Parent-Child	42	30.2%	10	9.2%	14	5.8%
5. Siblings	13	9.4%	10	9.2%	72	29.9%
6. Non-Immediate Family	2	1.4%	7	6.4%	15	6.2%
7. Clan	6	4.3%	2	1.8%	1	.4%
8. Grandparents-Grandchildren	2	1.4%	8	7.3%	1	.4%

Table 2

Frequency and Percentage of Segments

Utilizing Participant Groupings in Subrelationships

Number of Participants in Subrelationship	Documentary (n=139)		Soap Opera (n=109)		Prime Time (n=244)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
0	10	7.2%	2	1.8%	1	.4%
1	70	50.4%	62	56.9%	125	51.9%
2	46	33.1%	43	39.4%	68	28.2%
3	9	6.5%	2	1.8%	12	5.0%
4	2	1.4%	0	0.0%	11	4.6%
5	1	.7%	0	0.0%	7	2.9%
6	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	.4%
7	1	.7%	0	0.0%	9	3.7%
8	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	7	2.9%

Table 3

Frequency and Percentage of Segments

Utilizing One or a Combination of Interpersonal Topics

Number of Interpersonal Topics	Documentary (n=139)		Soap Opera (n=109)		Prime Time (n=244)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
0	96	69.1%	45	41.3%	136	56.4%
1	34	24.5%	36	33.0%	88	36.5%
2	8	5.8%	17	15.6%	16	6.6%
3	0	0.0%	9	8.3%	1	.4%
4	1	.7%	2	1.8%	0	0.0%
5	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

Table 4

Frequency and Percentage of Segments

Utilizing Topics of Conversation

Conversation Topic	Documentary (n=139)		Soap Opera (n=109)		Prime Time (n=244)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
(INTERPERSONAL)						
Marriage	8	5.8%	29	26.6%	12	5.0%
Family	35	25.2%	36	33.0%	64	26.6%
Romantic	3	2.2%	8	7.3%	26	10.8%
Professional/Business	6	4.3%	6	5.5%	7	2.9%
Other Interpersonal	2	1.4%	26	23.9%	14	5.8%
(NON-INTERPERSONAL)						
Personality	11	7.9%	16	14.7%	25	10.4%
Health	5	3.6%	29	26.6%	25	10.4%
Deviant Behavior	0	0.0%	7	6.4%	13	5.4%
Domestic	75	54.0%	57	52.3%	96	39.8%
Vocational	14	10.1%	20	18.3%	27	11.2%
Small Talk	56	40.3%	61	56.0%	119	49.4%
Explicit Topic	29	20.9%	21	19.3%	48	19.9%
Someone's Activities	1	.7%	7	6.4%	3	1.2%

Table 5

Frequency and Percentage of Segments

Utilizing One or a Combination of Non-Interpersonal Topics

Number of Non-Interpersonal Topics	Documentary (n=139)		Soap Opera (n=109)		Prime Time (n=244)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
0	7	5.0%	8	7.3%	20	8.3%
1	83	59.7%	33	30.3%	116	48.1%
2	40	28.8%	35	32.1%	80	33.2%
3	8	5.8%	20	18.3%	20	8.3%
4	1	.7%	10	9.2%	5	2.1%
5	0	0.0%	3	2.8%	0	0.0%
6	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
7	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
8	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

Table 6

Frequency and Percentage of Segments

Utilizing Forms of Style*

Style of Conversation	Documentary (n=139)		Soap Opera (n=109)		Prime Time (n=244)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Casual	103	74.0%	57	52.0%	146	61.0%
Personal	30	22.0%	41	38.0%	120	50.0%
Intimate	31	22.0%	53	49.0%	85	35.0%
Ritual	6	4.0%	3	3.0%	4	2.0%

*Frequencies and percentages account for any incidence of style, including segments with multiple styles, thus the percentages exceeding 100%.

Table 7

Frequency and Percentage of Intimate Style Segments

With Different Participant Groupings

Number of Participants	Documentary				Soap Opera				Prime Time			
	Pure*		Total*		Pure*		Total*		Pure*		Total*	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
2	5	38.5%	13	42.0%	24	82.8%	44	83.0%	26	74.3%	59	69.0%
3	3	23.1%	7	23.0%	2	6.9%	5	9.0%	6	17.1%	13	15.0%
4	1	7.7%	4	13.0%	3	10.3%	4	8.0%	0	0.0%	3	4.0%
5	3	23.1%	4	13.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	2.9%	3	4.0%
6	1	7.7%	1	3.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
7	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	2.0%
8	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	5.7%	2	2.0%
9	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	2.0%
10	0	0.0%	2	6.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	1.0%

*Pure refers to conversations that are exclusively intimate; total refers to all conversations that have at least some intimate style.

Table 8

Frequency and Percentage of Intimate Style Segments

With Different Familial Relationships

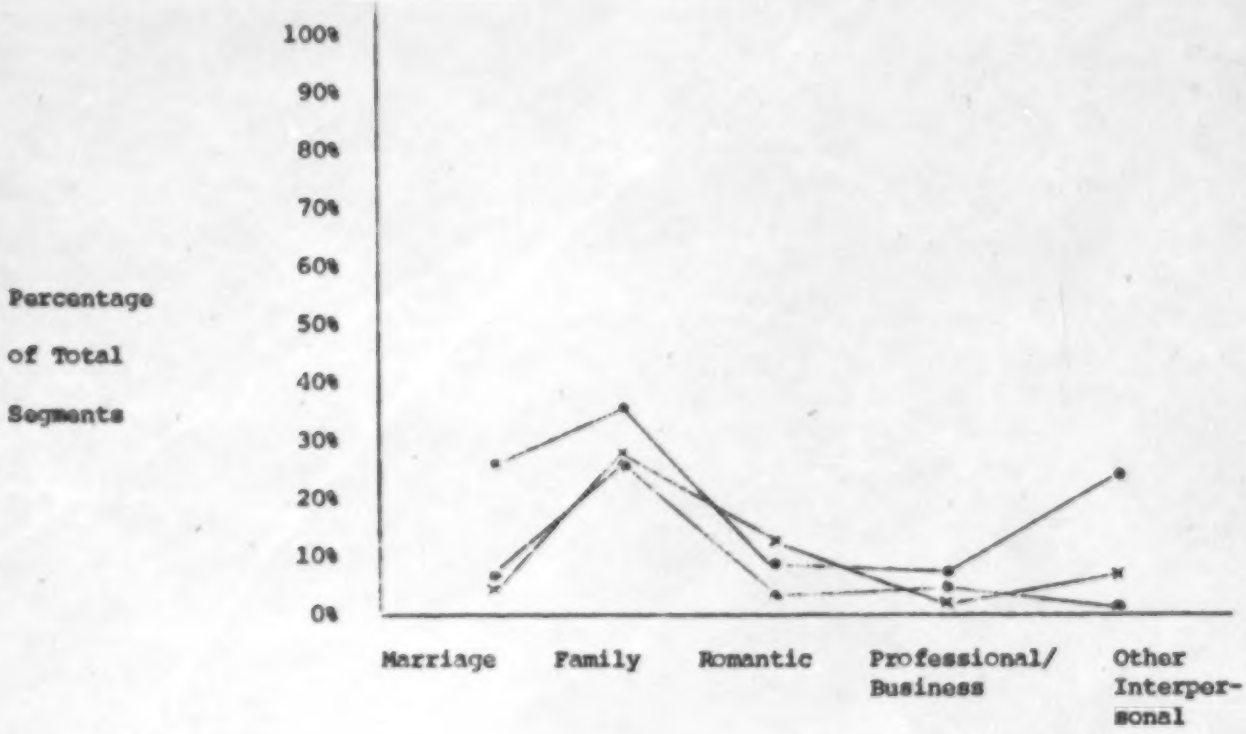
Familial Relationship	Documentary				Soap Opera				Prime Time			
	Pure*		Total*		Pure*		Total*		Pure*		Total*	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Husband-Wife	0	0.0%	3	10.0%	8	27.6%	13	25.0%	6	17.1%	11	13.0%
Father-Child	1	7.7%	4	13.0%	6	20.7%	11	21.0%	9	25.7%	29	34.0%
Mother-Child	3	23.1%	6	19.0%	1	3.4%	10	19.0%	3	8.6%	10	12.0%
Parent-Child	7	53.8%	14	45.0%	4	13.8%	5	9.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Siblings	1	7.7%	3	10.0%	4	13.8%	7	13.0%	14	40.0%	27	32.0%
Non-Imd. Family	1	7.7%	1	3.0%	4	13.8%	5	9.0%	2	5.7%	7	8.0%
Clan	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Grandparent-Grandchildren	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	6.9%	2	4.0%	1	2.9%	1	1.0%

*Pure refers to conversations that are exclusively intimate; total refers to all conversations that have at least some intimate style.

Chart 1

Percentage of the Total Number of Conversations

In Each Television Format That Utilize Interpersonal Topics



Documentary =

Soap Opera =

Prime Time =